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Japanese tourists returning to Hawaii

HONOLULU, Hawaii (AP) -- In the 21/2 years since the September 11 attacks, Japanese tourists have found a series of reasons to avoid Hawaii -- terrorism, ill will caused by the war in Iraq, fear of SARS. But now the Japanese are coming back.

"I feel safer here than other places, like Europe," said Yoshiko Odagawa of Tokyo, who was visiting Hawaii with her sister.

After six straight years of declining Japanese travel to Hawaii and a big plunge last year, state tourism statistics show signs of a turnaround. Japanese tourists are beginning again to crowd the beaches of Hawaii's major islands and the plush shops of Honolulu's Ala Moana Center.

The number of Japanese visitors to Hawaii during the first week of May, at the height of Japan's Golden Week holidays, was up 84 percent from the same period a year ago -- 29,681 versus 16,159, according to a preliminary count. All but four days in April showed gains, and the official count of Japanese visitors in March was up 11.2 percent from the same month a year earlier.

Hawaii, where tourism is the No. 1 industry, is also seeing an upsurge in tourists from the U.S. mainland. The state is projecting 6.7 million foreign and domestic visitors this year, compared with 6.4 million in 2003.

"We have seen a very positive upswing," said Gilbert Kimura, Hawaii regional manager for Japan Air Lines, which has seven daily flights between Honolulu and Japan. "The economy in Japan is improving, SARS has been controlled, fears of terrorism have subsided and people are traveling again."

"It's a good atmosphere," he said.

Uncertain recovery

In part because of the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the 1990s, the number of Japanese visitors to Hawaii peaked at 2.2 million in 1997 but has declined every year since then to 1.3 million last year, according to the state Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism. At the peak, Japanese visitors accounted for 33 percent of Hawaii's total; last year it was only 20 percent.

U.S. mainland cities, particularly New York, Las Vegas and Los Angeles, also are seeing more Japanese tourists, according to Yujiro Kuwabara of the Japan Travel Bureau. New York is popular, in part, because Japan's Hideki Matsui plays for the New York Yankees.

Some industry officials caution against making too much of the recent year-over-year increases, noting that

last year was a particularly bad year because of SARS and the war.

"The rebound is important for Hawaii's economy, but we're still talking about low levels of Japanese visitors compared with historic highs," said Carl Bonham, director of the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization. "Even on this path we won't be back to pre-September 11 levels for some time."

Whether the trend continues could be influenced by a number of factors, including a requirement that foreign visitors be fingerprinted and photographed before entering the United States. The Homeland Security Department recently extended the requirement to Japan, along with other U.S. allies Britain and Australia, effective September 30.

Currently, citizens of these countries are allowed to travel within the United States without visas for up to 90 days.

For the Japanese, "coming to Hawaii is almost like traveling domestically. This could become too bothersome for some people and they may go somewhere else," Kimura said.

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